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# HISTORY AND HISTORIANS IN AMERICA

BEING THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS OF  
THE ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
DELIVERED 14TH FEBRUARY, 1929

BY  
PROFESSOR T. F. TOUT,  
D.LITT., LL.D., F.B.A.

LONDON  
OFFICES OF THE SOCIETY  
22 RUSSELL SQUARE W.C.1

1929

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Author

May 29, 1929

TRANSACTIONS  
OF THE  
ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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HISTORY AND HISTORIANS IN AMERICA

WHEN I last had the honour to address this Society, I was on the point of starting for a tour in America. During some eight months I traversed the United States from sea to sea, from Boston to Virginia and from New York to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle, finishing up in Canada, which I crossed from Victoria and Vancouver to Quebec and Montreal. I visited many universities and colleges and lectured at some thirty of them. I inspected numerous libraries and had speech with many score of historians. There was much that was wonderful and strange to see and hear, but it was seldom that I could realise that it was a foreign country. If Quebec seemed a city of a France that had known no Revolution, and Santa Fé took one back to a small Spanish city with an intrusive Anglo-American element, the common tongue was a great link between the wanderer and his new friends, and he was never more bucked up than when he was assured by a leading newspaper of no mean city that, despite his strong English accent, his public orations were nearly always easily intelligible !

It was hard to be otherwise than at home. It was impossible to feel homesick when the extraordinary kindness and hospitality with which America greets her visitors was lavished on every side. In recounting this, one is but repeating what all other travellers have said. It is enough to put it on record, and that with the greatest conceivable emphasis. It was as impossible not to be at home, officially as well as personally. As President of this Society, I felt that I was visiting the brethren located in distant lands. It was only gradually that I got to realise that something between a fifth and a sixth of our constituency lies over the Atlantic. Out of our 800 fellows, over 100 are American and Canadian. Out of our 300 subscribing and exchanging libraries, just one-third are libraries beyond the Atlantic. And there is no need to tell the members of this Society what important contributions America has made to our *Transactions* and to the Camden Series. Of our most ambitious undertakings—such as the Bibliography of Modern History—is not Philadelphia responsible for the sixteenth century, though that has unhappily not yet seen the light? Was not the published seventeenth-century volume finished in Chicago?

Reflecting on all these links stretching over the Atlantic, I felt that I could not do better than take as the subject of this, my valedictory address as President, History and Historians in America. It is a huge subject, and I must be content to limit myself to History in American Universities and Colleges and to the historical output of American historians. I must also not shrink from giving offence to my Canadian friends by speaking of America when I really mean the United States. But my visits to Canadian universities were brief. I saw the great universities of Eastern Canada on the verge of their vacation, and I passed by the strenuous young universities of the West in the height of summer. I must therefore mainly speak of what I saw most of. Even then, I must leave out much that I should dearly love to say.

I must not spend more time than I can help in emphasising some essential differences between British academic methods and ideals and those of the United States—a difference the more important for us to realise since it results in the same words being used in the two countries in such different senses that confusing and misunderstanding are likely to arise to representatives of both nations, when they cross the Atlantic and take stock of the doings of the other side. Thus, to take one example: “college” to us means academically something smaller than a university—whether it be an inchoate university that aspires to but has not yet attained university rank, or whether it be a smaller corporation within a university, sometimes so self-sufficing and powerful that the university tends to become a loose federation of colleges, with little life or spirit of its own and little mission save the conferment of degrees. In America the college is the undergraduate department: the university is the combination of this with the various schools of professional and post-graduate work which loom so much larger in America than with us. American universities are governed autocratically by Presidents, responsible to a small body of lay trustees, who seldom meet and generally leave things to the President. They are, therefore, like the Federal Government or the Railways, monarchical in constitution while their English counterparts are aristocratic, ruling through boards, councils and committees, whose endless meetings give the zealots for University business little time for the weightier matters of research, sometimes hardly enough for teaching. America has few honour schools, but a general pass course with an almost unlimited variety of options, extending over four years before the first degree of B.A. In this the utmost specialising possible is normally to take what is called a “major,” that is a course in a single subject that extends over three years at least, but which is studied along with several other subjects. One result of this is that American examinations are more numerous,

but less strenuous and less vitally important. A whole life is not determined, as it is still sometimes with us, on the accident of being fit in a particular examination week.

In America real specialisation, in history as in everything else, only begins after the B.A. It is "post-graduate work" and it centres round the thesis, though there is also some examination work to be done before the goal is reached. A thesis of moderate originality leads to the M.A.; a thesis of greater originality and extent may then be undertaken which leads to the Ph.D. And to take a Ph.D. is practically compulsory for all men and women who aspire to an academic career. In most cases you cannot become a professor until you have been stamped with this hall-mark. To facilitate the attainment of this rank and to train aspirants for it in historical method, there are, in every university where post-graduate work is done, seminars of great variety and complexity. The result is an enormous output of theses, which some universities—injudiciously I think—insist on being published in the form in which they were submitted to the examiners for the degree. Naturally they vary in merit, like English theses of the same sort: but these latter have the merit of being rarely set forth in print, and when they are printed, often years later, they have not seldom grown into something solid and presentable. Fortunately, the increasing cost of publication is turning American authorities towards realising that it is better to issue a few good theses, than a larger number of immature ones.

I must not tarry by further emphasising the differences between British and American universities. Yet it is important to remember that American schools seem, according to American testimony, less thorough and the results of their work less permanent, than is the case with the better sorts of British schools. The absence or rarity of compulsions, both at school and college, leads to a neglect of languages, and one of the weak points of the



American historical student is that he is even often less familiar with the tongues in which his sources are written than his English counterpart. In making this statement please do not think that I hold any illusions as to the adequacy of the linguistic equipment of many English aspirants to historical fame! But I am bound to confess that foreign languages, and especially Latin, are for many Americans a worse stumbling-block than even the lack of that broad basis of general historical knowledge that the honour school of almost any British university affords. Perhaps one grows more conservative as one gets older, but America certainly made me see that there was more to be said for honour schools and compulsory language subjects than in my hot youth I had ever dreamed was the case. It also taught me that the thesis, though a good servant, is a bad master, and that the cult of the repeated thesis is sometimes a mistake. If America had something like an English honour course for her M.A., and reserved her thesis for the Ph.D., the advantages of both systems might be retained and the disadvantages minimised. In adopting, rather too whole-heartedly, the German thesis system, the American reformers of a generation or two ago forgot that the German youth, when he went to the university, had had in his *gymnasium* a good old-fashioned, well-rounded education, and had passed an examination that might well be compared to the British or American pass degree.

In making this criticism I am ignoring one fundamental point. The German student at a university aims at a specialised professional or academic career. It is quite different in America, where it is becoming the fashion for every boy and girl to go to college, though after college the boy will go to business and the girl will adorn Society, just as much as if he or she had never been to college at all. Mass production of educated men and women is not impossible, though not so easy as Mr. Ford finds the mass production of automobiles. Mass production of real scholars is impossible, as some of the overgrown

American universities are beginning to realise. And what I am looking for now is historical scholars, not generally educated persons with a special interest in history.

Thus the very universality of the American educational appeal has its nemesis. Things, however, are gradually righting themselves, and, more and more, certain universities are beginning to stand out where the would-be historian can best be equipped for the race. There are the great universities of the East, strong in tradition and in endowment, with two or more centuries of history, and an absolute independence of state subsidy or control. There are the great state universities of the Middle West and the Pacific Slope, strong in their huge throngs of students, and in receipt of ample support from their respective states. Their *states*, I must emphasise, for nowhere is education the business of the federal government; it is the affair of the forty-eight sovereign commonwealths called states, which make up conjointly the federation called the United States. It follows that the ideals and methods of education vary with the social and economic conditions, the outlook, the history and origins of the individual state. The variety of the outlook breaks the monotony of state control.

I am bound to say that the state governments—whose competence Americans themselves often strongly criticise—seem on the whole to have left the universities of their creation very much to themselves and that the political outlook does not seriously affect either academic freedom or studies. It is perhaps at its worst when it considers that professors should think twice before ploughing the son and daughter of a citizen of the state who pays his taxes regularly and expects his children to be turned out of college with the proper educational label. I don't think we need take seriously the Mayor of Chicago's crusade against textbooks with an anti-patriotic bias, inspired by the malignant and immortal "King George" who, after spending his youth in denying the Americans their

freedom, is devoting his declining years to feasting American professors that they may traduce their own country and glorify its enemies. Such tendencies may prejudicially affect school books, but they have little weight in university teaching. I am told—I know not whether rightly—that some intelligent American publishers publish different editions of school histories for northern and southern states. But university teaching in America is fairly free, and suffers, if at all, from the general tendency of the country towards uniformity and conformity of judgment. The modern historians of the “Colonial period” are admirably impartial. You find much more “American bias” in an old-fashioned Whig historian in England, like Sir George Trevelyan, than you get from the admirably trained and learned historians who do excellent work on the investigation, in their own land, of all phases of the American Revolution.

What sort of history do the American universities study, and what contributions do they make to historical knowledge? The answer to this question is not easy to give in a short compass. Naturally and properly their first concern is with their own national history, and no one can blame them for that. Equally properly, they are still more particularly concerned with the history of their own state or the group of states to which their commonwealth belongs. Beyond this, they look to Europe as a main source of their civilisation. This in the East generally means to Europe in general but to England in particular. To the French Canadian it means the *ancien régime* in France. To the Scandinavian and Teutonic Middle West it may often signify Norway or Sweden or Germany. To the Pacific Slope it means Spain and, after Spain, Spanish America. Moreover, in California special attention is paid to the history of what we should call Eastern Asia, notably China and Japan, whose influence on the Pacific lands and the Pacific Coast cannot be neglected. In the same way California has very serious

schools of Spanish American and still more of Mexican history, just as in New England and its western offshoots, historical origins suggest the meticulous examination of the Elizabethan and Stewart England which sent forth its first colonists over the seas, and, beyond that, an appeal to the Middle Ages out of which the later Britain grew. The zest for quite recent history has gripped American as strongly as it has seized hold of British historians, and the wonderful collection of documents and records which President Hoover has presented to his own Stanford University enables, I can well believe, the origins and results of the Great War to be studied with at least as much particularity amidst the woods and bays of Palo Alto as in any of the European capitals. Altogether the hive of history is humming everywhere with busy workers. The honey which they produce, though appealing differently to different tastes, is, as a rule, sound, pure and good. We must be prepared for a great variety of output; we must recognise that the work of the prentice learning his trade is different from that of the master. But the masters are there, and if they are few, they are few in any other land. But there are not many English workers on history who have not had reason to salute some American master whose work is to them an inspiration, and there are fewer still who have not pleasant memories of friendly talks and deep discussions with American comrades in their pursuit.

Mediæval History does not bulk largest among the fields to which American historians have devoted their attention. But we have for many years looked to the United States for a steady and increasing output of sound and original contributions to mediæval history and especially to the mediæval history of England. If I speak of these at greater length than I have been able to devote to other aspects of history, you must forgive me. But the cobbler who makes his shoes of mediæval leather is naturally inclined to think that there is nothing like his own particular sort of leather to make solid and lasting footwear,

and I am proud to be able to speak strongly both as to the quantity and the quality of mediæval research in America. It was not until I had spent many months in America that I fully realised the appalling difficulties amidst which the American mediævalist worked. The atmosphere of America, with its optimistic outlook to the future, and its profound conviction that the present and future are greater and better than the past, is not always very sympathetic to the investigation of remote antiquity. If this can be overcome, there is more fundamental trouble. The unpublished material on which the best work is necessarily based is nearly all three thousand miles away, even from the universities and colleges in or near the Atlantic seaboard. The mediævalist from California,<sup>1</sup> or Washington, has a week's weary and costly journey over another three thousand miles by train, the mediævalist from Colorado has a good two thousand miles by train before he can reach the places where steamers carry him another three thousand miles over the ocean. Such a scholar is lucky to be able to make the journey in a fortnight and for that he has to incur expenses that make a deep hole into the budget of even the most opulent of American professors. And when he arrives on this side, he has to support himself in costly cities like London or Paris, where prices are not, in my experience, very much lower than in the cities of his own land. And it is quite an illusion to think that American historians derive from their profession much higher remuneration than we on this side enjoy, while the swarm of research students who are only slowly mounting the ladder have to make sacrifices to their science which many of us would shrink from, sacrifices which would be impossible but for the liberality—which this country might well emulate—which "sabbatical years" and travelling bursaries and fellowships do something to minimise. Moreover, he has to work as

<sup>1</sup> I have carefully avoided mentioning names in this very rough survey, but I cannot forbear recording the grave loss to our science in the sudden death of Professor Paetow, of Berkeley, one of the strongest of western mediævalists.

a rule through the hottest and most uncomfortable season of the year when his British brethren are recuperating from their sessional labours among the mountains or on the seashores. Of course these difficulties are not confined to mediævalists. Indeed the modernist is in some ways worse off, for his material is infinitely bulkier, more scattered, and less well calendared and arranged. Nevertheless, they come—men and women students of all periods and of all aspects of history. They come here year by year in their scores, and no one of us of the Old World can work through a summer in the Public Record Office or the British Museum without adding largely and profitably to his American acquaintance. Some we may find who, inspired by a spirit of adventure and love of seeing new men and cities, have come rather earlier than they need. But most know their business and know what they are out to seek. One cannot speak with too great enthusiasm of the real hardships and sacrifices which they willingly incur in their zeal to advance their science. There are few among us in comparison who make their journey in the opposite direction. But those of us who do so meet with a welcome and a hospitality which may well make us feel how cold relatively has been our reception of these transatlantic pilgrims to the shrines of historical material.

I have hinted at the facilities with which most American institutions do their best to lighten the difficulties of the eastward-bound historian. Two other conditions must also here be stressed which make possible the devotion of American students and scholars to the history of the Old World and to the history of those countries in particular from which most of the American stock originally came. These are the excellence and accessibility of American libraries and the gradual accumulation in the American continent of great masses of manuscript material for European, and especially for British, history. Among the things for which I envied the American scholar most was the admirable organisation of the great University Libraries

of the New World. We on this side may have more precious rarities, but they, on the other side, know better than we do how to order a library so that the research student can have the greatest facilities for his work. I know of no university library which does more to help forward research than the great library at Harvard, where every professor has his study and the humbler research student has his little cubicle, where the earnest worker can gather around himself the indispensable tools that he has in constant use, while all have access to the well-arranged stacks, so disposed that books dealing with particular subjects are grouped together with a maximum degree of accessibility. And at New Haven I was privileged to see plans for an even more magnificent and convenient library building for Yale University which, I feel confident, are now rapidly being carried out in stone with the faith and enthusiasm that characterises all the great American seats of learning. Nor are these standing by themselves. In the newest of Western and Middle Western universities the library is fostered with a zeal, and at an expense, which put to shame the newer university libraries of England. As far as printed books go, the greater American libraries are exceedingly well equipped, and if some gaps must still be there, there is always the wonderful Library of Congress at Washington and the huge Public Library of New York, itself a synthesis of a whole group of collections, and the impressive Library of Columbia University.

In these great collections of books the American student can generally find what printed volumes he is in search of. The deficiency is rather in manuscripts and in older and rarer volumes, which are everywhere extremely difficult to procure. But these deficiencies are being rapidly supplied, and there are many public authorities and many millionaires who are doing their best to fill up the gaps. It would require years of study and travel to speak with authority upon these libraries, and, as I wish to speak on first-hand knowledge, I will confine my remarks to the one great

American private library at which I was privileged to work for some six weeks last summer. This is the Henry E. Huntington Library at San Marino, near Pasadena in California, only a few miles from Los Angeles, the greatest of the cities of the Pacific Coast. Its history is, however, sufficiently typical to illustrate many other similar cases, though few, I imagine, have acquired so great a mass of manuscripts or so many rarities and curiosities. And I speak of it with the more alacrity since I found on my return to England last September a fierce controversy was raging in the newspapers in which zealots for British scholarships bitterly complained of the wholesale abstraction of our best manuscripts and unique early editions that they might be locked up in an inaccessible and remote spot in the Pacific Coast, where they are likely to remain permanently lost to scholarship.

With the lamentation that so much good material for history is passing out of this country, I can express a hearty sympathy. I believe that most scholars would welcome some sort of limitation on the export of our choicest documents and curiosities, such has long prevailed in Italy. But so long as the trade of exporting manuscripts and bibliographical curiosities is a legal one, we cannot blame too severely the ancient houses, struggling against hard times, for making what they can of possessions which have a greater appeal to the scholar than to most of those who own such treasures. Indeed, I would blame them more severely for the indifference which in too many cases they have shown to their ancient documents, indifference to the extent of not knowing what treasures they possess. Even more reprehensible is the curious way in which many of them have locked up their possessions and absolutely denied access to them, even to the best qualified of scholars. Thus many of the most historical family archives have never been brought before the eyes of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, a body that has done an immensity of good work and might, I venture to think, do even better work were



the eminent historians of modern periods sitting upon it afforded by a commissioner or two who has done good original work on mediæval historical materials. Unluckily "war economies" still only allow it a ludicrously inadequate income, so that it has accumulated manuscript calendars of various collections which it can only publish with exceeding slowness. Considering the amount of our post-war budgets, it seems an unworthy economy to hold up this good work for the sake of saving a few hundred pounds a year.

It is not enough, however, that the pre-war resources of the Commission should be restored. Post-war conditions clamour for further extension of its powers. It is surely a permissible argument that in any really civilised state such a responsible body as the Historical Manuscripts Commission ought to have a legal right to examine and calendar documents of historical value, and, if necessary, to prevent their exportation from the country. Unless scholarship is to lose sight permanently of much priceless historical material, we must prevent unrestricted free trade in the sources of our history. Apart from the danger of dispersion, there is still before us the fact that certain owners of historical manuscripts sternly refuse scholars access to them. Though many owners of historical material leave nothing to be desired in the way they give access to their treasures—and their number, I am glad to say, is much on the increase—there are cases where American scholars have been refused permission even to see them, and that not only from individuals who have some excuse for regarding them as their own private property, but from official custodians of public or quasi-public records. It is still, I fear, the case that the registers of some bishops remain inaccessible, or only accessible by the payment of fees beyond the means of the average scholar. Such churlishness is, I venture to think, at least as reprehensible as their sale outright. Fortunately, as regards bishops' registers, the number of peccant dioceses is now quite small, and most of them are reasonably easy of access.

If the prohibition of the export of historical manuscripts

and the compulsory calendaring of the manuscripts of recalcitrant owners are both outside practical politics, the least we can do is to make some efforts to keep track of manuscripts which do change owners or leave the country. An admirable beginning has been made in this direction by the Institute of Historical Research in London, though it has found real difficulties in accomplishing its task. It is vexing enough to find that manuscripts which have been calendared by the Historical Manuscripts Commission, have, like the Hastings manuscripts, been moved from Ashby-de-la-Zouch to California before the Commission's calendar had been put on the market. It is still more irritating when an uncalendared collection also takes its flight over the Atlantic. The task of recording for history's sake what there is in any of these collections can only be fully and perfectly accomplished, when it has been made legally necessary to record the sale of such manuscripts, whether within or without the country.

However these things may ultimately turn out, I think that we have no right to blame the wealthy Americans who, under expert guidance, purchase such documents as their owners are willing to sell. Some of the letters I read on my return last September suggested that the plutocratic purchaser bought his documents in order to keep them under lock and key and gloat over them for his own personal gratification. There may be such cases, but I should like to say with emphasis that the Huntington Library is not one of them. Its creator, a Californian railway magnate, spent huge sums in purchasing not only books and manuscripts, but a wonderful collection of eighteenth-century paintings and gave them a home in his own great house at San Marino, on the last of the foothills where the Californian uplands slope down to the plain of Los Angeles. He was not himself a scholar or a connoisseur; but he followed the best advice that he could get. His art purchases were extraordinarily happy and built up a most remarkable and coherent collection of masterpieces. As a

collector of books and manuscripts he was, I imagine, at first mainly wishful to bring together unique specimens, rare early editions, treasures of illumination and enrichment. But before he died, he handed over his treasures to a carefully selected body of trustees and empowered them to use the funds with which he endowed them to buy any books or pictures that might illustrate the history of civilisation. A wider commission could not be imagined, and the trustees are men who can be trusted to make a wise use of the discretion left to them. They have made up their minds not to be content with a museum of curiosities, but to combine with this a working library for scholars. It was on their invitation that I spent five or six weeks in one of the most beautiful places in the world, where the heats of summer were never so excessive as to prevent a northerner, like myself, working at full power. My mission was to report on their mediæval manuscripts and especially their historical manuscripts. My time was all too short for a comprehensive survey, but I had opportunities for taking general stock of the collection and that task was made more stimulating by working side by side with various American scholars who were similarly attacking other sides of the library. It will take years before the collection can be completely catalogued, classified and arranged. Gaps will have to be filled up; a considerable modern library of reference books will have to be purchased. But I should like to say with absolute emphasis that the library is already accessible to all properly accredited scholars, and that anyone who goes there will receive a most cordial welcome, and every help to pursue any line of study that he may wish to take up.

To the British mediævalist the library presents some extraordinary attractions and suggests some severe limitations. There is an enormous mass of charters, public and private, ranging from the twelfth century to the end of the Middle Ages. The basis of the manuscript store is found in several big English collections which Mr. Huntington

bought. The most complete is a wonderful assemblage of Battle Abbey manuscripts, the completest series that I struck. It came, I think, from the Phillips Library, and a rough catalogue of them was printed some eighty years ago, when, before Sir Thomas Phillips bought them, they were in vain offered for sale, I was told, to the British Museum, at a price which was then small and now seems ludicrous. They were not very accessible at Cheltenham, except to plutocrats who could pay a guinea a day for the privilege of working in the library. They are now open to the world, and afford material, not only for the history of a great Benedictine abbey, but for the economic and social history of many manors and hundreds in East Sussex and West Kent. It is no doubt a pity that they are so far away from the region where they were made: and I can sympathise with a Sussex archæologist being a little sore at their removal to the other side of the globe. But there they are, and there they are accessible, and there is something to rejoice that the American ecclesiologist or economic historian has a mine in which he has only to dig to find real treasures. Unluckily, the only Californian University where at present the study of mediæval history is strongly and ably pursued is at Berkeley, some four to five hundred miles away. But there are two big universities hard by at Los Angeles, within only a few miles, and as any American university is liable to sudden and vigorous expansion, it is not too much to hope that in time there may be a local school of mediæval history to reveal the treasures of Battle Abbey to the world. And a few hundred miles doesn't seem a big distance in America!

The other mediæval collections at the Huntington Library are less complete, but in some ways more attractive. There is, for instance, what are now called the Huntington Manuscripts, till recently the property of the late Mr. Rawdon Hastings of Ashby-de-la-Zouch. I spent a good deal of time in copying some of these, only to find when I got home that the Historical Manuscripts Commission has

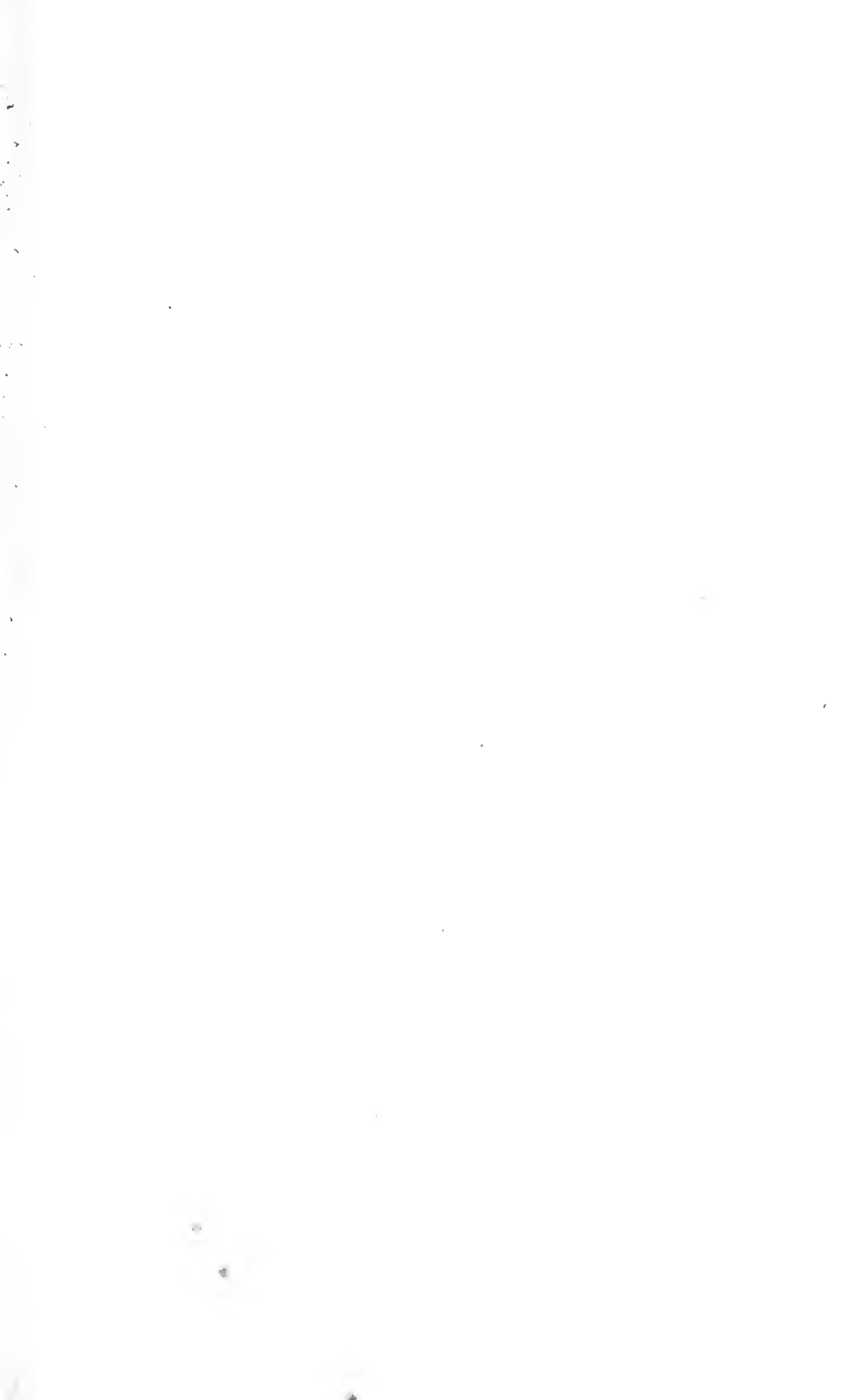
just published the first of four volumes in which they will be described. But, luckily for me, some of the calendaring is so much abbreviated that a few characteristic "mentions" which I had noted are not recorded in the published volume. Besides this, there is the great Stowe Collection, whose "Grenville evidences" contains an immense assortment of mediæval documents, public and private. There are numerous important items bought at the various Phillips sales. There is a considerable proportion of the Ellesmere Manuscripts, including the remarkable Ellesmere Manuscript of the Canterbury Tales, which the Manchester University Press published in facsimile more than twenty years ago. There is a rich store of Middle English Manuscripts, which should attract literary historians. To all sorts of scholars alike the Huntington Library Management gives every facility for purchasing photographs and roto-graphs. But I must not go on any longer, and would not have tarried so long but that I feel that there are at present few scholars who have first-hand knowledge of it sufficient either to explain wherein its richness lies or to defend it from unwarrantable attacks, such as those to which I have already referred. It is some poor return for the kindness and hospitality I received at San Marino to do what in me lies to expound the true state of things about the Huntington Library.

Printed in Great Britain by  
Butler & Tanner Ltd.  
Frome and London













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